Iowa State Board of Education Position Statement on Legislative AEA Proposal April 10, 2003

State lawmakers are discussing measures that would substantially change the way that services from Area Education Agencies would be delivered and, at the same time, substantially reduce funding for those services. Because such changes could seriously endanger services to students and to teachers, and because overall efforts to improve student performance could be damaged, the State Board of Education has very grave concerns with regard to these proposals.

Since 1992, the strategic plan for the State Board of Education has set as its over-arching system goal: "To improve the level of learning, achievement, and performance of all students so they will become successful members of their community and the workforce." One of only three support goals focuses on coordinating "the educational support system so it is focused on helping schools and communities meet their local goals."

Iowa's Area Education Agencies play a vital role in that educational support system, providing essential services that improve student learning – either directly or through sustained professional development programs that improve instruction.

The State Board of Education has directed its policy and advocacy based on experience and research that shows the most effective way to improve student learning is to improve instruction, and the most effective means to improve instruction is through professional development. Area Education Agencies are by far the greatest (in many cases the exclusive) provider of professional development to teachers and administrators for Iowa's 371 school districts. Their experience and expertise allowed them to respond very quickly to the demand for the training of 1,500 teachers within three months to implement teacher mentoring and induction established by the landmark Teacher Quality Student Achievement legislation.

The largest part of the work of every Area Educational Agency is providing services for students with disabilities. Iowa's system for providing special education services is nationally recognized and has been cited as a model for other states. It would be nearly impossible for every local school district to provide these services with the same efficiency and quality as found at the regional level. It would clearly be impossible if the funds to be shifted to local districts were even less than is available to the AEAs today.

This is a time when demands on local schools through federal policy and local expectations are higher than ever before. It is also a time when local resources are inadequate and the capacity of the Iowa Department of Education has been diminished. Adding severe reductions in AEA services to this mix is an untenable consideration.

AEA services more than adequately meet the intent of the legislature when it established the current AEA system in 1974 in response to the need for equity in the quality of educational services statewide. In order to further ensure that students, teachers, schools, school districts and nonpublic schools receive consistently high quality services across the state, the State Board of Education recommended, and the Governor and General Assembly agreed, that an accreditation system be put in place to provide a level of accountability for Iowa Area Education Agencies that is more demanding than for education services agencies in any other state. Iowa's AEAs must not only report on customer satisfaction in areas such as improving instruction, but also are accountable for student achievement in their AEAs and must consistently demonstrate improvement of that student achievement.

The State Board is not opposed to making improvements in the services of Iowa's Area Education Agencies. In fact, the Board has increased expectations in two different sets of administrative rule changes for the AEA accreditation process. But a plan to shift the funds to local districts and reduce those funds in the process is very unlikely to provide for the needs of students that are well-served today. Such a proposal would be particularly harmful to small districts that depend on the AEAs for the widest range of services, including administrative sharing and support.

Customers of Iowa's AEAs – teachers, parents, administrators and local board members of public and nonpublic schools – express strong support for AEA services as they exist today. Without compelling evidence that Iowa students and teachers will benefit from this change, the State Board of Education stands opposed.

####